

THE GREAT BOOKS: *A Chaucer-Milton-Burger*

GEOFFREY WAGNER

EVERYONE KNOWS that the first really formative English Literature course an American student takes is some series of masterpieces. Some such introduction to literature is mandatory, and properly so, at practically every "institution of higher learning" and even high school throughout the country. Though you call it English IV or Humanities II (and substitute masterpieces of world literature for some of the more ephemeral moderns), you still have to administer somewhere along the line a brief canter through English literature to even the most materialist engineer at the most sternly vocational of our schools today. In a sense these great books courses—and I am not here concerned with their implications as educational philosophy—are introductions to the whole discipline of creative ideas for many students, and consequently the way they are taught is of the utmost importance. It is possible that the general student's entire outlook towards books, and even ephemeral reading, may be conditioned by this first elementary approach.

The great books program is taught, for the most part, by a posse of perspiring young instructors and assistant professors all armed with the best intentions, and lately freed from the bug-hunting governesses of the graduate academies. Associate and full professors, according to old-fashioned custom, will be plucking the plums of advanced courses—"electives," as

the more compulsory of these are termed—although the greybeards, too, will sometimes take a turn in ripping into the great books bonanza with a certain baroque glee.

As far as English goes, the syllabus will almost certainly begin with Chaucer and Milton; in the three universities where I have taught I have found English literature based firmly on these masters, so far as the majority of the students is concerned. Shakespeare was a dramatist, a genius, an exception; he was not primarily an expositor of ideas. And aristocratic old Spenser has never figured on any sophomore schedule that I know. The Rinehart and Modern Library college editions both ignore him completely, and in a new text-book for this kind of course¹ where he makes an unusual appearance, he commands only seventy-seven pages of original as against Milton's ninety-eight. In the English course I currently teach from this text, in fact, Spenser has no allocation at all (compared with three weeks each for Chaucer and Milton)—a state of affairs, I strongly suspect, widely prevalent.

The trouble, everyone readily agrees, is the rapid rate at which these readings have to be taken. This forces a technique of teaching on the material and puts the literature teacher, *as exponent of ideas*, in an extremely strong position: indeed, in a commanding one. For in three weeks it is virtually impossible so to acquaint twentieth-century American sophomores with

Chaucerian background that they can become familiar with the relative value of Chaucer's ideas. By this I mean that an opinion we may today find shocking, because of the obligatory nature of our progressive beliefs (material good invariably ushering in moral improvement), might have meant tolerably little to Chaucer in his day; whereas, taken in context, a gibe by Chaucer at the Church was frequently enough a gibe at the State, since in such a society as his, you criticize society as a whole through ecclesiastical forms. A contemporary student, however, living in a world in which the Church is denied secular power, sees in quite another light an attack on the offices of religion. The connotations of Milton's Leviathan-like whale, or of his cormorant, to both of which evil and greedy creatures Satan is reduced in *Paradise Lost*, mean nothing to us today; just as the United Nations' movie, depicting in one sequence an owl as a symbol of wisdom, completely misfired (and had to be remade) when shown in certain parts of India, where the owl is traditionally representative of stupidity.

At the same time the burden of interpretation on the teacher of this kind of course is great. The students are inquisitive and receptive. It is no use telling them they need to have some smattering of the history of ideas before sitting in judgment. The new criticism has been whaling into them precisely the reverse view. Mr. Robert Hutchins, in encouraging the great books as a curriculum, has been doing the same. Have not students now read in Mr. Mortimer Adler's *How To Read a Book* that "almost all of the great books in every field are within the grasp of all normally intelligent men"? Everyone is aware that the amount of history taught in high schools is minimal, sorry rags of fact hung on the stalwart washing-line of economic determinism. (Poor authoritarian Hamilton!) So the great books are open, and the teacher must do what he can with them in the time provided.

"An introduction to the understanding

and enjoyment of literature through the reading of great books," was the departmental description of one such course I taught, including, as it did, selections from the Bible, Plato, Dante, Cervantes, and Goethe. Another, which skipped blithely from Homer to Voltaire, was listed as follows: "It touches upon the history, philosophy, religion, science, and other areas of the intellectual history of western civilization." It certainly did. And unless you were an expert in some five civilizations you were forced back onto the methodology of the average literature instructor—as follows. Since you cannot take a literary concept and expect to find it the same in a totally different era (not to mention language-group), you make masterpieces of the past recognizable by conceptual comparison with the present. By standards obtaining today, of course, Cervantes and Dante may seem a trifle comfortless (even "cynical"), unlike Milton, Byron, or Melville. But this is what is called making the past "real" or "living" to students, and it virtually consists of countenancing the whole of past culture, wherever and however located, as leading up to contemporary western society. Rather naturally, your view of the latter is an operative one.

In this sort of popularization, then—about the only method of teaching the Adler-Hutchins curriculum in anything under ten years or so of specialist study—the past tends to turn out as the Bad Old Days. They were not so enlightened in the past; they were unblessed with Freud, not to say Heidegger. This is not so silly as it sounds, when one considers the approach taken to the Renaissance by an influential interpreter to the public like Francis Henry Taylor, sometime Curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, who exhibits the identical romantic paradox that one finds in the art-presentations of an organ like *Life Magazine*: viz., we admire the Renaissance, we respect the aesthetic virtues of certain static eras, but we are committed to—nay, we are crusading for—the twentieth century, the era of rev-

olution and technology, where change is *per se* improvement. I scarcely need to add that it is but one step from this form of popularization to that of the best-selling historical novel, be it about thirteenth-century Spain or Norman England, an iconic performance of action with a big residual content of contemporary society between its covers, where Romans may "play hooky" from school and saints say "So long." That is just why this kind of fiction is read: as a pseudo-solution of our "worries" by comfortable stereotypes on the boards of expurgated history. All this can be made to look glibly persuasive, too, for truth is a powerful force, and its very distortions will contain a kind of coherence.

Since, therefore, Chaucer and Milton seem to be representative great books authors, it is permissible to regard two general volumes introducing them as characteristic of the spirit in which these courses are widely taught. Both *A Chaucer Handbook*² and *A Milton Handbook*³ have been through many printings each. Both figure first in countless supplementary reading lists, both feature on the shelves of unpeopled reference libraries, both are bought by indigent students as "ponies" and so on. What makes them especially representative is not so much this public reverence, however, as the claim to impartiality both subsume. Both pretend to rehearse, in a scholarly manner, original texts and the main mass of secondary material. In fact, the impartiality of both readers is specious, concealing a set of prejudices as sharp as needles. These prejudices, which are taken as axiomatic, or as principles, tend in the same direction, one symptomatic, I suggest, of the whole literature program.

The unsuspecting newcomer to Chaucer, for instance, receives from Robert Dudley French, author of *A Chaucer Handbook*, an "objective" condensation of the Peasants' Revolt which does not diverge much from that to be found in *The English Rising of 1381*, by two Marxist scholars, R. H. Hilton and H. Fagan.⁴ Mr. French assures us that "There is no evidence at

all that the rising of 1381 had communistic objects," which was scarcely the opinion of someone who was there (like Walsingham). Or again, when Froissart at the time fears "that the lords and rich citizens might be murdered" in the three days' terror established in London by the revolutionaries (and glossed over by Messrs. Hilton, Fagan, and French alike), Mr. French adds equally, "The leaders of the rebels probably had no such bloodthirsty intentions."

But it is in his attitude to the Church, especially the priesthood, that Mr. French, a Yale professor at the date of first writing this book, appears most biased. Churchmen are seen as almost unanimously corrupt and recreant. There is a gloating section on "Corruption in the Church" ("a thorough-going worldliness"), Wycliffe is praised highly ("there is no denying the justice of his criticism"); and Chaucer's brilliantly drawn, yet caricatural, Pardoner is termed a "just representative" of the Church. On the other side, it must be conceded that the young King certainly deceived the rebel peasants at Mile End; "The plain fact of the deceit which he practised," Mr. French avers, "cannot be obscured." But Mr. French does not point out, reciprocally, what the young Richard II (whom Froissart depicts as extraordinarily brave) clearly knew: *viz.*, that you do not sit down at the conference table with criminals.

When we come to *A Milton Handbook*, by James Holly Hanford, it is perhaps more easily understandable to find these ideas propounded through the poet involved. Even so, we might have been spared quite so fervently and dogmatically pro-revolutionary an approach to Milton as Mr. Hanford maintains, under the guise (of course) of total objectivity, of "the plain fact." "We owe the epic of *Paradise Lost*," Mr. Hanford states categorically, "to Milton's absorbing interest in the politics of the time and to his sense of civic obligation." This sets the tone. Despite the air of impartiality with which Mr. Hanford strives to sophisticate his volume, the student is

from the start encouraged to read *Paradise Lost* as a political tract.

Indeed, Mr. Hanford's treatment of the British Civil War is little at odds with that of the Marxist critics, Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell.⁵ "Individualism" (p. 79) substitutes in the same way for revolution, just as the word "democratic" has to be watched closely—Mr. French had told us that the Peasants' Revolt was also a "democratic revolution." Bishop Gauden, for example, a Christian who disliked the idea of lopping off the heads of those who disagreed with you as a social panacea, and tried to win sympathy for the murdered monarch Charles I, is given short shrift by Mr. "Pym" Hanford. Milton's pro-regicide pamphlets, we learn too, represent the "greatest battle of his controversial career,"⁶ the most excitable of them being termed "unimpassioned." *Areopagitica*, however, "Milton's great defense of the freedom of the press," is really falsified, for in no place in his five-page summary of this document does Mr. Hanford reveal that it accepts the principle of censorship, which it most certainly does, even in the appeal to chauvinism with which it concludes. Mr. Douglas Bush, a more honest apologist for Milton, admits of him that "while he attacks censorship before publication, he allows for subsequent censorship of writings that endanger the public good." The public good, that is, as interpreted by John Milton. When the public good (or public bad, as some of us may sincerely feel it to be) requires it, even Milton (see *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*) can call for a strong leader at the head of the state. And in just the same way Mr. Hanford romps through *Of Education*, the divorce pamphlets, and other supposedly "liberal" works from Milton's pen.

The truth is that, like most Puritans of his time, Milton detested the masses. Cromwell and his Latin Secretary were eager to make sure that power should not slip out of their grip and descend to the people at large. By "the people" Milton generally meant what we today call the middle

classes, reserving the term "the poor" for what we now call the masses. In *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma*, Mr. Arthur Barker observes that Milton assumed "that 'citizens' meant the propertied, that they were 'the people' in a political sense, and legally stood for the nation as a whole." Harrington, whose analysis of the causes of the Civil War was adopted by contemporaries like Neville and Baynes, repeatedly uses "the people" for the propertied or franchised classes (i.e., those possessing more than forty shillings of land in 1640), while Pym's speech on the Grand Remonstrance in 1641 deliberately contrasted "the people" with the sectaries and "the poor," who were menacing the middle class position. In the debate on the causes of the Civil War during the Parliament summoned by Richard Cromwell in the spring of 1659, at the end of this period, Baynes made a lengthy speech praising "the people" and hoping that the new government should be "built upon property, else the poor must rule it." "Property," Baynes concluded unequivocally, "is now with the people."

One need not labor the point. It is made soundly enough in Zera Fink's *Classical Republicans*, a study listed in Mr. Hanford's bibliography. Yet the furthest Mr. Hanford allows himself to go along these lines, in acquainting student generation after generation with Milton, is the tentative admission that a late pamphlet by Milton "expresses his lack of faith in a true democracy." It does indeed.

On the religious issue, Mr. Hanford also takes it for granted that you do, and should, share his opinions and credal tests for writers, forgetting that these may be offensive to students of other faiths. It is doubtless true that a slice of Marxist "dialectic" is neatly discernible in the English Civil War in this respect, for the clash of Anglicanism (thesis) and Puritanism (antithesis) produced, what neither side really wanted, religious tolerance (synthesis). Yet, from the pedestal of omniscience he gratuitously assumes, Mr. Han-

ford gravely informs us that Charles II's Declaration of Indulgence was "mainly intended as a relief for Catholics," while wholly glossing over Milton's religious bigotry. *Lycidas* is as good as misread when we are told of "the invective against the clergy" in that poem without being warned that this comes from the mouth of "The Pilot of the Galilean lake" (St. Peter) who "shook the mitred locks" and is thus himself a Bishop.

Here, then, are two examples, surely

representative, of the manner in which the national great-books schedule is taught on a rapidly increasing scale. The intelligent and scrupulous teacher will remain arbiter and discriminate in his approach. But there is so little time. The young are too busy, or too enervated, to approach the masters of the past from their own period, "from their heart." And so they rely on the Gothic cultivation of their elders; and the Chaucer-Milton-burger is weighed on the grocer's scale of mechanical "progression."

NOTES

1. *Modern British Writers*, under the general editorship of G. B. Harrison, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1954, two vols.
2. Robert Dudley French, *A Chaucer Handbook*, second edition, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1927-47.
3. James Holly Hanford, *A Milton Handbook*, fourth edition, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1926-46. Mere mention of the name of John Holly Hanford in connection with Milton studies is supposed to throw one into a paroxysm of awe—"Towards him they bend / With awful reverence prone. . . ." To relieve the reader of something of this, I list herewith errata revealed by a cursory reading of my edition of *A Milton Handbook*. It will be noted that it is a late one and so, presumably, corrected many times.
 - (p. 8) Milton's M.A. given as 1632; at p. 358, it is given as 1635.
 - (p. 12) Academic Proslutions published in 1673, whereas at p. 72 they are published in 1674.
 - (p. 98) *Areopagitica* is referred to as "the fourth and last of the prose works to be written and published in the industrious year, 1644." It was the third only.
 - (p. 111) incorrect dating of total blindness for Milton (cp. his correspondence with Philaras).
 - (p. 128) Milton's *Of True Religion* incorrectly abbreviated.
 - (p. 135) *Manso* thus titled, becoming Latinized at p. 179.
 - (p. 136) *Epitaphium Damonis* is dated as ff.—1641 at p. 136; 1640 at p. 179; 1640 at p. 371.
 - (p. 157) Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* misdated.
- (p. 179) "into fairyland" translates Milton's Latin "sub terris."
- (p. 239) another oddity, if not error, of Latin translation (cp. Mr. Hanford's "oblivion" with Columbia Milton's "silence").
- (p. 220) "Shakespeare lived in a world of time, Milton in a universe of space." This remark is apparently attributed to Miss Marjorie Nicholson. It originated from Masson, and is properly ascribed to him in Douglas Bush, *English Literature of the Earlier Seventeenth Century*, Oxford, 1945, p. 385.
- (p. 291) Milton did not "reënter" the field of public controversy in 1674: it was in 1673 that he did so.
- (p. 346) the names of Herbert Read and Bonamy Dobrée mis-spelt.
- (p. 382) lines 18-19 a misquotation (as to capital letters etc.).
- (p. 395) we are told that Milton "divided Books VIII and X into two each," while at p. 193 he "divided Books VII and X into two each."
- (p. 396) footnote 3 incorrect.
4. H. Fagan and R. H. Hilton, *The English Rising of 1381*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1950.
5. Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, *The Good Old Cause*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1949.
6. This incidentally exemplifies Mr. Hanford's slovenly English style: for does he here mean Milton's controversial career or Milton's career in the field of controversy? The context supports the latter interpretation, rhetoric the former.